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**Poverty and Progress: A Reassessment of the
Malthus-Godwin Debate**

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Poverty and Progress: A Reassessment of the Malthus-Godwin Debate



T. R. Malthus by John Linnell (1834),
Wellcome Collection



William Godwin by Henry William Pickersgill
(1875), National Portrait Gallery

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Introduction

Thomas Robert Malthus provoked an intense and polarised debate with the publication of his seminal *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798 that still resonates to this day. Malthus utilised his unique brand of Newtonian logic coupled with Christian doctrine to challenge the utopian legacy of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, by establishing an ‘immutable’ principle of population.¹ The multi-faceted debate over Malthus’ conclusions, retrospectively labelled the ‘Malthusian controversy’, witnessed the involvement of a diverse range of commentators from the Lake poets: Samuel T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Robert Southey, to pamphleteers such as William Cobbett.² However, the debate with William Godwin over mankind’s role in the anticipated future of society is the principal concern of this dissertation.

Godwin’s response to Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine’s reflections on the French Revolution, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, was published in 1793. The extensive work, over two volumes, propagated the radical, enlightenment view that through the advancement of human rationality and virtue, and the decline of institutions and government, mankind would progress towards an egalitarian, utopian and anarchist state.³ Malthus’s *Essay* denounced this utopian, perfectibility thesis by illustrating that preventative and positive checks on unsustainable population growth would result in misery and vice, and that despite all rational attempts to perfect society, this principle of population would always govern human happiness and progress.⁴ The ideas of both writers underwent an initial transformative evolution from 1798-1803, however the years 1803-1818 witnessed a severe stagnation of the debate and conflict between the two writers, culminating in arguably acrimonious exchanges in the latter stage between 1818-1825. The question of why this unique debate progressed in this manner is the primary focus of this dissertation, and a problem that has eluded historians to this day.

¹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* ed. Antony Flew (Reading, 1970) p126 (All subsequent citations from the first edition of 1798 are from this edition, hereafter cited as: Malthus, *Essay 1798*)

² James P Huzel, *The Popularisation of Malthus in Early Nineteenth Century England: Martineau, Cobbett and the Pauper Press* (Aldershot, 2006) pp1-17

³ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, in Two Volumes* (London, 1793)

⁴ Malthus, *Essay 1798* pp61-72

Historiographical consensus over the intent, meaning and significance of the ideas conveyed by Malthus and Godwin has arguably not been reached. John Avery, in *Progress, Poverty and Population: Rereading Condorcet, Godwin and Malthus*, is one of the few historians to have specifically studied the contemporary debate, though has been widely criticised for his work.⁵ Despite the size and ambition of the text, criticism from Mark Philp, Richard Whatmore and William Petersen illustrate that Avery is guilty of three historiographical faults: the failure to understand 'the complex historical context of the debate', the failure to consider texts published in the latter half of the debate and the anachronistic attempt to judge who was right by inappropriately applying 18th century concepts to 20th century environmental problems.⁶ The culmination of these flaws is a fundamental misrepresentation of the meaning and intent of Malthus and Godwin's works. Other historians who deal with the debate, such as Donald Winch, apply a more biographical format with a clear focus on one actor. Though Winch's nuanced interpretation of Malthus is convincing and persuasive, his limited study of Godwin arguably leads to an oversimplification of his ideas and his transformative impact on Malthus' changing ideology.⁷ From these limitations, a niche in the historiography becomes clear: the recreation of the debate in its full extent with an even study of both characters and a clear appreciation of the context. In the pursuit of this aim, an adapted version of the Cambridge School of Intellectual History will be employed, influenced primarily by Quentin Skinner, with the objective to re-establish the intention of the writer by placing ideas in their historical context.

Quentin Skinner in *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* summarised the theoretical framework pursued by members of the Cambridge School. The framework prioritises the re-establishment of the intent of the writer in order to fully understand the text:

The understanding of texts...presupposes the grasp of what they were intended to mean and of how that meaning was intended to be taken...to

⁵ John Avery, *Progress, Poverty and Population: Rereading Condorcet, Godwin and Malthus* (New York, 1997)

⁶ William Petersen, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp. 644-645; Mark Philp, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 457 (Jun., 1999), p. 737; Richard Whatmore, *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Nov., 1998), pp. 830-831

⁷ Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge, 1996) p257-65

understand both the intention to be understood, and the intended act of communication must have embodied.⁸

This is shown to be achieved through a distinctly contextualist mode of approach where the meaning of concepts is inextricably tied to the wider context in which it was written:

Any statement...is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and is thus specific to its context in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend.⁹

This framework is effectively summarised by Skinner's Cambridge peer John Pocock:

The thrust of Skinner's strategy of contextualization is to return the text, and the speech acts implied in writing it, to the language context existing at a particular time, and to construct the author's intentions as they were shaped at that time.¹⁰

Godwin seems to have personally acknowledged the importance of social and linguistic context himself by articulating that 'it is seldom that we are persuaded to adopt opinions...by the mere force of argument...the human intellect is a sort of barometer, directed by the variations that surround it.'¹¹

The implementation of this framework enables the elimination of historiographical faults, identified by Skinner, that are symptomatic of the study of the Malthus-Godwin debate. Skinner identifies the 'mythology of parochialism' as, briefly, the result of a 'misreading' of a text due to the lack of understanding of the context and culture, culminating in the imposition of the reader's 'familiar criteria of classification and discrimination'.¹² Petersen labelled this imposition the 'anachronistic distortion that is prevalent in 20th-century interpretations' of the debate, implying a placement of the ideas in a time in which they do not belong.¹³ Donald Winch similarly identified this as a symptom of Malthusian historiography with some historians viewing Malthus as 'a social scientist according to some influential current interpretations of what a modern social scientist should look like'. The misinterpretation of

⁸ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory Vol. 8, No. 1* (1969) p86

⁹ Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding' p50

¹⁰ John Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Inquiry', *Political Thought and History: Essay on Theory and Method*, (2009) p.12

¹¹ William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spiritual Sermon* (London, 1801) pp8-9

¹² Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding' pp24-26

¹³ William Petersen, 'The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now', *Demography Vol. 8, No. 1* (Feb, 1971) p13

ideas presented by Malthus is a result of ignoring the context and imposing a familiar, alien classification on the ideas in a deeply parochial framework.¹⁴ In short, the contextualist approach prevents the easy mistake of reading ideas in a distinctly modern light, thereby coercing them into a modern framework of understanding rather than placing them within their own contextual narrative and appreciating the nuances of the idea that are linked to the specifics of the time.

This approach was effectively employed by Winch in his short biography of Malthus. He sought to 'answer a deceptively simple historical question: what was Malthus attempting to say to his contemporaries?'¹⁵ This style is strongly reminiscent of Skinner's methodology, a corroboration that is confirmed by the fact that Skinner is cited as the editor of Winch's book *Riches and Poverty* and edition of Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Through this theoretical framework, this dissertation will ask three fundamental research questions. First, what were Malthus and Godwin trying to say in their first essays? Second, in what way did their ideas change during the course of the debate? Third, why did their ideas change, with particular reference to the relationship of Malthus and Godwin and the changing circumstances of their lives. To ensure adherence to the contextualist approach, a chronological style will be pursued. This chronological style will thematically assess the varying concepts within a broader narrative framework of the debate.

The argument will be broken down into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will address the lives of the writers, their influences and the intent and meaning behind the first essays on the *Principle of Population* and on *Political Justice*. The second chapter will address the initial evolution of their ideas within a mutually influential relationship from 1798-1803. The third chapter will illustrate the breakdown in the relationship between the two writers between 1803 and 1818, and the perceived stagnation of their ideas and the debate, occurring simultaneously to the externalisation of the debate to other commentators. The fourth chapter will inspect the revival of the debate from 1818-1825, an area of little previous historiographical attention. Over the course of the argument it will be illustrated that their common Dissenting education and initially influential relationship drove the evolution of their ideas, but their irresolvable ideological differences with respect to institutions accelerated

¹⁴ Donald Winch, *Malthus* (Oxford, 1987) p94

¹⁵ Winch, *Malthus* p94

their conflict. These similar and contrasting ideologies will be shown as the product of their education, influence and changing personal circumstances.

One criticism of Skinner and Winch's approach to Intellectual History is their focus on linguistic context without a study of character, personality or events in the wider context.¹⁶ The potential downfall is that in focusing fundamentally on textual analysis without a consideration of the character and life of the writer, the appreciation of intent and subsequently meaning is limited. As such, the sources to be included will be broadened to include diaries, memoirs and contemporary events that may have had a tangible impact on the philosophy of the writer. Perhaps the most useful and extraordinary of these sources is the digitised diary of William Godwin.¹⁷ The recent advance of digital humanities has enabled historians to access vast amounts of information much faster, and in very clearly presented formats. The online diary is an invaluable resource insofar as it presents a daily record of Godwin's life from 6th April 1788 to 7th March 1836, providing insight into his intellectual relationships, reading patterns, intellectual development, spheres of influence, work habits and a vast amount more. The source itself was deemed worthy to win the annual BSECS award for digital resources, though has still not received considerable historiographical attention, perhaps due to its relatively recent publication in 2010.¹⁸ This dissertation is therefore in the unique and privileged position to use potentially new evidence to produce an interpretation that can build upon the existing literature. The diary itself will be used to illustrate the changing relationship of Godwin and Malthus through the evidence of their meetings, to provide insight into the changing circumstances of Godwin's personal life with particular regard to the influence of new acquaintances during the course of the debate and the role of his family, and to illustrate the acquaintances with whom he engaged with.

¹⁶ Erik Asard, 'Quentin Skinner and his Critics: Some Notes on a Methodological Debate', *State Scientific Journal* (1987) pp102-7

¹⁷ *The Diary of William Godwin*, eds. Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010). <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk> [accessed 09/01/2015]

¹⁸ <http://www.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/william-godwins-diary-wins-award.html> [accessed 09/01/2015]

I: Early life, Influence and First Essays

The primary aim of this chapter is a summary of the initial ideas of the writers before the outbreak of the transformative debate, attempted with specific regard to the context of their own lives.

Though this dissertation is concerned with Godwin's perfectibility thesis, it cannot be understood without reference to Godwin's radical anarchism and its foundation in Rational Dissent. In his study of Godwin's intellectual development Mark Philp provides a concise summary of the core philosophies presented in *Political Justice*:

Godwin's arguments for the demise of government are of a piece with those for human perfectibility. Both derive from his commitments in philosophy and ethics: in particular from his belief that moral truth is objective, that men and women are capable of grasping truth through the exercise of their reason and judgement, that perceiving this truth is sufficient to motivate the corresponding performance, and that our capacities for reasoning and our grasp of these truths have improved through history and will continue to improve.¹⁹

The aforementioned 'exercise of their reason and judgement' rested on Godwin's adherence to the individuals total 'right to private judgement' free of external interference, described as a 'doctrine so unspeakably beautiful'. *Political Justice* defined private judgement as 'the exercise of understanding', which, 'to a rational being is the one rule of conduct'. The element of 'right' is predicated on 'society... [having] no right to assume the prerogative of an infallible judge', or more simply 'no right to interfere' with the exercise of individual judgement.²⁰ This attitude towards private judgement can be convincingly shown to be strongly reminiscent of the perspective of the Rational Dissenters, and is the first example of Godwin's anti-institutional anarchism.

The Dissenters argued against the Test and Corporations Acts of the 18th Century that sought to drastically punish their nonconformist religion, by establishing that a magistrate had no right to interfere with a man's mental faculties. An example presented by Philp of this Dissenting perspective is that of Samuel Heywood:

¹⁹ Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* p2

²⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice* vol. II pp120-44

No man can subject his opinions in religious matters to the magistrate, for he is instructed by the great author of his being with the exercise of his mental faculties...the right to private judgement never could be surrendered to the magistrate, because it can never be within his jurisdiction.²¹

Within this example it can be clearly seen that Dissenters such as Heywood reviled all attempts by institutions to infringe upon an individual's 'right to private judgement' in a manner similar to Godwin. This example is particularly persuasive, not just because of the obvious textual and linguistic similarities, but also because of the evidence provided in Godwin's diary. On the 13th February 1790, in the formative years of *Political Justice*, Godwin wrote that he 'Dine[d] with anti-tests', referring to the Dissenting circle who argued against the Test and Corporations Act, notably including Samuel Heywood.²² This diary entry illustrates that in the years Godwin wrote *Political Justice* he was actively involved in the Dissenting circle who so closely reflect his own opinions on private judgement.

A clear progression from private judgement to Godwin's perfectibility thesis becomes apparent given the context of Rational Dissent. The first connection is between an un-infringed right to private judgement and the moral obligation to act purely through reason and not through emotion or volition:

One of the first inferences from the doctrine of voluntary action, is the existence of the understanding as a faculty distinct from sensation...to a rational being there can be but one rule of conduct, justice and one mode of ascertaining that rule, the exercise of understanding... sensual pleasures are momentary...and leave long intervals of painful vacuity.²³

This argument implies that through the exercise of understanding or private judgement, free from emotion or external interference, a man can act judicially. This faculty of understanding enables the enactment of justice without the need for institutions, making societal institutions obsolete:

[W]hole species will become reasonable and virtuous. It will then be sufficient for juries to recommend...without assuming the prerogative...if force might gradually be withdrawn and reason trusted alone, shall we not one day find that juries themselves and every other species of public institution, may be laid aside as unnecessary.²⁴

²¹ Samuel Heywood in Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* p21

²² *Diary of Godwin*, 13 February 1790

²³ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. II* pp120-44, 343

²⁴ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. II* p557-8

The anticipated decline of institutions that previously infringed upon the right to private judgement in turn exaggerates the advance of reason, 'susceptible to perpetual improvement', insofar as it is no longer limited by external bodies.²⁵ Reason itself is judged to have a direct relationship to the body implying that as it progresses it can 'extend its empire' over control the body:

If we have in any respect a little power now, and if mind be essentially progressive, that power may...extend beyond any bounds we are able to prescribe to it...The men therefore who exist when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal.²⁶

This invocation of anticipated immortality is conceded by Godwin to be in the realms of conjecture. Nevertheless the progressive power of the mind over the body is a continuous theme in all editions of *Political Justice* and as such is a key part of his philosophy. Godwin, in a note in his manuscripts, confessed that 'the reflections into which I was led by the arguments respecting the doctrine of necessity, made me an atheist'.²⁷ The rejection of Calvinist belief in predestination and Original Sin is a logical conclusion to the combination of Rational Dissent and perfectibility insofar as religion represents an external authority interfering with private judgement, prescribing morality outside of reasoned decisions, something which is clearly not compatible with *Political Justice*. Thus in the wake of his religious disillusionment, immortality as the culmination of his perfectibilist claim was perhaps his secular, utopian claim to an earthly heaven or paradise now not available to him in the realm of religion. This then, a perfect example of how context can illuminate meaning and intent, would imply that Godwin's anarchism and perfectibility thesis were influenced fundamentally by Rational Dissent with the conclusion being an ironic rejection of religion (ironic given the religiosity of the Dissenters) and the secular claim to an earthly paradise. Perfectibility then can be seen to have deeply personal significance in its relationship to his theological views which had such a foundational influence on him in his early life.

Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* articulated the first extended attack on the utopian legacy of enlightenment thinkers such as Godwin. To establish the meaning and

²⁵ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. II* p600

²⁶ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. I* pp865-871

²⁷ Godwin, in Philp *Godwin's Political Justice* p34

intent of the *Essay* a brief summary of the ideas will be presented within the context of his life. For this purpose, the memoir of Malthus, written 'immediately after his death, by an early and intimate friend of Mr Malthus [William Otter]', is a useful biographical source that details, not only the significant events of his life, but the details of his character and relationship with those around him.²⁸ Though the memoir itself as a source presents a difficulty with regard to the bias of friendship and of respect of the recently deceased, it nevertheless provides an interesting perspective on the life of Malthus and an incredible insight into events which are perceived to have influenced him in his life.

The principle of population was used by Malthus to illustrate that, contrary to Godwin's thesis, civic institutions are not the source of evil; instead, 'vice and misery' are the direct result of the 'natural law' of the principle of population:

Population when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio...by law of our nature that makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind.²⁹

From the establishment of this principle, the criticisms of Godwin then diverged into a multi-faceted attack. Godwin's placation of the population problem by establishing that 'myriads of centuries of still increasing population may pass away, and the earth be yet found sufficient for the support of its inhabitants' was dismantled by Malthus' charge that there was a 'constantly operating check on population' that had always existed, and would continue to affect humanity.³⁰

These checks were divided into preventative checks, an active reduction in the birth-rate, and positive checks, causes of widespread death such as 'epidemics, pestilence, and plague', which result in 'vice' and 'misery' respectively. Preventative checks, such as the delay of marriage, are argued to have led to vice because the passion between sexes 'have been fixed laws of our nature and...we have no right to conclude that they will ever cease to be what

²⁸ William Otter, *Memoir of Robert Malthus* in Thomas Robert Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy, Second Edition 1836* ed. Morton Paglin (Fairfield, 1986) xxi

²⁹ Malthus, *Essay 1798* pp71-2

³⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. II* p861

they are now'.³¹ This passion, in the event of delayed marriage, would inevitably lead to 'promiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions...improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connections (contraception)', all of which are 'vices' that keep mankind in 'inextricable unhappiness'. This would then 'destroy that virtue and purity of manners which the advocates of equality and of the perfectibility of man profess to be the end and object of their views'.³² As this preventative check fails, positive checks are argued to reduce population, namely poverty, disease, war and famine. This point is a strong denial of Godwin's belief in reason's ability to conquer the body and in man 'ceasing to propagate' insofar as it decrees sexual passion as an unchangeable part of human nature.

Malthus' philosophical basis for this criticism of Godwin's thesis was a combination of his Anglican theology and Newtonian logic, inspired by his education in Cambridge. On the subject of his faith the memoir recounts that 'the goodness of the Deity was a theme on which he loved to dwell', an argument persuasively supported by text from the *Essay*:

The sorrows and distresses of life...inflicted by the Supreme Creator...seem necessary...to soften and humanise the heart, to awaken social sympathy, to generate all the Christian virtues, and to afford scope for the ample exertion of benevolence...the heart that has never known sorrow itself will seldom be feeling alive to the pains and pleasures, the wants and wishes of its fellow beings.³³

This passage illustrates that, for Malthus, the Principle of Population and the miseries associated with it were justified as acts of divine providence. The implication of this theology was the transcendence of the checks on population into a 'natural law' of 'Providence', 'immutable' and beyond the interference of man.³⁴ This clearly denies Godwin's idea of a progressive man being able to perfect society through the decline of institutions. Any utopian vision is given clear and unrepentant dismissal in Malthus' juxtaposition of divine providence, continuous human passion and evil.

This is further underlined by Malthus' Newtonian criticism of Godwin based on his logical fallacies. From Newtonian logic, the reductionist view that something is the sum of its smallest parts, the perfectibilist claim that due to partial improvement of man in the past one could

³¹ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p71, 112

³² Malthus, *Essay 1798* p92, 124

³³ Otter, *Memoir* xlviii; Malthus, *Essay 1798* p209

³⁴ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p207

assume the indefinite improvement in the future, is severely flawed. Briefly summarised, Malthus criticised the perfectibility thesis as an excessive extrapolation, or having been 'reasoned from causes to possible effects rather than from observed effects to possible causes'.³⁵ The fact that his Newtonian logic was, for Malthus, reconcilable with his theology is illustrated in his idea that having 'rejected the light of natural revelation which absolutely promises eternal life...they introduce a species of immortality of their own'.³⁶ As we have seen from Godwin's Rational Dissent and atheism, this is a particularly persuasive idea.

Further to his Newtonian and theological philosophy, Malthus is labelled in his memoir as 'a firm, consistent, and decided Whig...strongly and sincerely attached to the institutions of his country, and fearful of all wanton experiment and innovations.'³⁷ It is of no surprise, therefore, that he argued Godwin had made a 'great error...attributing almost all the vices and misery that are seen in civil society to human institutions', considering his Whig faith in institutions and moderate reform.³⁸ The significance of this Whig perspective, within his overall philosophy, is his continued rejection of Godwin's anarchism throughout the debate, implying his resolute maintenance of what can be called his core ideologies.

The logical conclusion of Malthus' Newtonian logic and theology with respect to the Principle of Population was the idea that interference with the 'immutable' principle led to an enhancement of its negative effects. Positive checks including famine and poverty are argued to have been 'confined chiefly...to the lower orders of society', and driven by the Poor Laws that were designed to protect them.³⁹ This charge was justified by Malthus' explanation of the vicious circle of self-perpetuating poverty driven by the Poor Laws:

A poor man may marry with little or no prospect of being able to supply a family in independence. They may be said, therefore, to create the poor which they maintain; and as the provision of the country must, in consequence of the increased population, be distributed to every man in smaller proportions, it is evident that the labour of those who are not supported by parish assistance, will purchase a smaller quantity of provisions than before, and consequently more of them must be driven to ask for support.⁴⁰

³⁵ Winch, *Malthus* p28

³⁶ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p155

³⁷ Otter, *Memoir* p li

³⁸ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p132

³⁹ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p93

⁴⁰ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p97

This led Malthus to the conclusions that the Poor Laws tended to ‘increase population without increasing the food for its support’, by enabling this cyclical population increase and by ‘eradicating’ the ‘spirit of independence’ that would prevent a man starting a family he cannot support.⁴¹ The culmination of this argument was Malthus’ desire for the ‘total abolition of all the present parish laws’, for their impact in tampering and exaggerating the principle of population and extending the grasp poverty.⁴²

Due to the clearly elitist implications of this argument, Malthus witnessed aggressive allegations, most notably from Karl Marx who labelled him a ‘bought advocate’ of the bourgeoisie, justifying their subjugation of the poor as divinely inspired.⁴³ This, however, would be a misrepresentation of Malthus’ intentions. The memoir argues that:

The best testimony to the soundness of the measure...the poor themselves will derive and eventually be conscious of, in the elevation of their minds, the bettering of their condition, the improvement of their morals and habits, and especially the softening of that harsh temper and disposition towards the other classes of society.⁴⁴

Though it must be recognised that this memoir was certainly partisan and often hyperbolic in its praise of Malthus, it does offer unique insight into what might have been his intention. This would imply that Malthus’ *Essay* was not merely written as a criticism of utopian theses, but also to inspire the reform of social policy for the general betterment of the human condition, which establishes a curious similarity to Godwin whose drive in *Political Justice* is the perpetual improvement of the humanity.

This chapter has illustrated that both Godwin and Malthus were influenced heavily by their education and early lives, and that their philosophy cannot be understood without due consideration of the context. Having established the basis of Godwin’s Rational Dissent, atheism and anarchism as well as Malthus’ theology, Whig subscription and Newtonian logic, the next chapter will inspect the progress of the debate from 1798-1803.

⁴¹ Malthus, *Essay 1798* p98

⁴² Malthus, *Essay 1798* p101

⁴³ Karl Marx in Winch, *Malthus* p5

⁴⁴ Otter, *Memoir* li

II: Debate, evolution and assimilation (1798-1803)

The years 1798 – 1803 witnessed a considerable evolution in the ideas of Malthus and Godwin within the framework of their mutually influential relationship and changing lives. For Malthus, the two key changes were the acceptance of moral restraint, or the ‘restraint from marriage from prudential motives, which is not followed by irregular gratifications’, as an acceptable preventative check and the idea that the Poor Laws need no longer be immediately abolished.⁴⁵ For Godwin it was the partial acceptance of Malthus’ Principle of Population and the immediacy of unsustainable population growth, which would eventually undermine the pillars of his perfectibility thesis. In keeping with the theory of this essay, the changing ideas will be contextualised to identify the meaning and intent of the evolution.

Godwin’s acceptance of the Principle of Population can be found in *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr’s Spiritual Sermon*, written in 1801 as a reply to the proliferating criticism of *Political Justice*. In it Godwin states:

[Malthus] appears to me to have made as unquestionable an addition to the theory of political economy as any writer for a century past. The grand propositions and outline of his work will, I believe, be found not less conclusive and certain than they are new...I admit fully that the principle of population in the human species is in its own nature energetic and unlimited.⁴⁶

This polite yet emphatic acceptance of the Principle of Population appears to be in direct contravention of Godwin’s *Political Justice*. As we have previously seen, the Principle of Population was incompatible with Godwin’s thesis of perfectibility in *Political Justice*. Thus this acceptance must have occurred as a result of a change to his philosophy.

The direct influence of Malthus on Godwin cannot be underestimated. Malthus appears 12 times in the Diary of Godwin from 1798 – 1801, the most concentrated number of meetings between the two. They were initially introduced by their mutual publisher, Joseph Johnson. This is a significant fact given that Godwin dined at Joseph Johnson’s 324 times from 1791 – 1809, and through Johnson was introduced to his greatest influences such as Thomas Paine

⁴⁵ Malthus *An Essay on the Principle of Population* ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge, 1992) p72 (All subsequent citations from the second, fifth and sixth editions are from this edition, hereafter cited as: Malthus, *Essay 1803, 1817 or 1826*)

⁴⁶ Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned* pp55-74

and even his wife Mary Wollstonecraft.⁴⁷ The Joseph Johnson events were where Godwin discussed some of his most famous philosophies, such as his anarchism in 1791, and perhaps had a decisive influence on the formation of his ideas.

Indeed following the first introduction they went on to meet, dine and call on each other independently. The diary entry for 23rd May 1801 illustrates that Godwin worked specifically on the section of *Thoughts Occasioned* dedicated to Malthus, whilst calling on him for a meeting: "Answer, p. 52/2. Call on...Malthus (n)", the (n) meaning that Malthus was unavailable. Despite Malthus' unavailability, the fact that Godwin called upon Malthus as he was working on the section devoted to him, hints at the respectful relationship and the directness of the influence.⁴⁸

Godwin's acceptance of the Principle of Population, however, was not a capitulation or the end of his role in the debate. The culmination of his changed philosophy was the promotion of another check upon increasing population:

Sentiment, whether virtue, prudence, or pride, continually restrains the universality and frequent repetition of the marriage contract...Everyone, possessed in the most ordinary degree of the gift of foresight, deliberates...how he shall be able to support the offspring of his union...where a man possesses every reasonable means of pleasure and happiness, he will not be in a hurry to destroy his own tranquillity or that of others by thoughtless excess.⁴⁹

This argument for the utility of prudential restraint as a preventative check to population growth devoid of vice or misery is reminiscent of his attitude toward moral 'duty' in *Political Justice* and thus illustrates Godwin's maintenance of his Rational Dissent influence:

If I partake of the nature of morality it must be either right or wrong, just or unjust. It must tend to the benefit of the individual without entrenching upon...the mass of individuals...if justice have any meaning, it is just that I should contribute everything in my power to the benefit of the whole.⁵⁰

The 'duty' to 'contribute everything...to the benefit of the whole' has a clear linguistic similarity to the aforementioned 'hurry [not] to destroy his own tranquillity or that of others'.

This idea is incredibly similar to that of Malthus:

⁴⁷ *Diary of Godwin*, 11 November 1791

⁴⁸ *Diary of Godwin*, 23 March 1801

⁴⁹ Godwin *Thoughts Occasioned* pp55-74

⁵⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice Vol. I* pp75-6

The happiness of the whole is to be the result of the happiness of individuals, and to begin first with them...He who performs his duty faithfully will reap the full fruits of it, whatever may be the number of others who fail.⁵¹

The reasoning for this similarity can be perhaps found in the fact that both Malthus and Godwin had a shared education in Rational Dissent insofar as Dissent inspired Godwin to conclude that moral duty, justice and happiness were the result of unrestrained reason. Malthus was educated in the Dissenting academy by Gilbert Wakefield and in the memoir is cited to have, 'by his own acknowledgement derived great benefit from the course of study which he pursued with him'.⁵² This is corroborated by Winch who asserted that 'they share so many assumptions of this kind – a fact that can largely be explained, I think, by their common roots in Dissenting culture'. Furthermore the view that the happiness of people as a whole was the sum of its individual parts reflects the level of reductionism concurrent with Newtonian logic.

From this common ground on moral duty Malthus was able to reconcile himself to moral restraint as a check on population which does not appear 'under the head of vice or misery'.⁵³ This can be immediately seen in the title of Chapter 1, Book 4: "Of moral restraint, and the foundations of our obligations to practise this virtue", which, through the words 'obligations' and 'virtue', implies a moral duty in Dissenting and Godwinesque language. The chapter concludes by stating:

It is in the power of each individual to avoid all the evil consequences to himself and society resulting from the principle of population, by the practice of a virtue clearly dictated to him by the light of nature...exercise of this virtue to a certain degree would rather tend to increase than diminish individual happiness; we can have no reason to impeach the justice of the Deity because his general laws make this virtue necessary, and punish our offences against it by the evils attendant on vice⁵⁴

This text contains clear linguistic similarities to Godwin's advocacy of the duty to moral restraint while reconciling Malthus' theological belief in Divine Providence governing punishment of immorality. Furthermore Winch, in a note under the text, highlights that this

⁵¹ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p226

⁵² Otter, *Memoir* xxiv

⁵³ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p9

⁵⁴ Malthus *Essay 1803* p224

sentiment 'echoes a pamphlet of Malthus' tutor Gilbert Wakefield', reinforcing the significance of Malthus and Godwin's common Dissenting education.

The reconciliation of Malthus' Newtonian logic to the principle of moral restraint can be found in the experiences of his travel. His memoir cites that in the first *Essay* 'his documents and illustrations were imperfect' and as such he sought to accumulate more data through his travels around Scandinavia.⁵⁵ Patricia James illustrated that, in his travels, 'Malthus consulted 102 authorities, and many of them were works in considerably more than one volume' and through the information garnered, found considerable evidence for the success of delayed marriage.⁵⁶ Referring to Norway Malthus found that a peasant was not able to marry 'till he had served his time [military] which...might not happen till he was 40 years old', which culminated in a strong preventative check on population growth.⁵⁷ This new data did clearly illustrate that delayed marriage could have a significant impact upon the growth of population, without necessarily producing vice, if conducted prudentially and virtuously.

This acceptance of moral restraint led to a change in tact towards Poor Laws. Where previously the Poor Laws were seen to have incited vice and misery through an acceleration of the Principle of Population, the potential for delayed marriage based on moral restraint as a preventative check on population inspired Malthus to argue for a 'gradual abolishment' of the Poor Laws rather than 'immediate'. The gradual abolishment of the Poor Laws was also predicated on a distinctly Smithian and Whig based 'parochial education' system:

In an attempt to better the condition of the lower classes of society, our object should be to raise this standard as high as possible, by cultivating a spirit of independence, a decent pride...among the poor. These habits would be best inculcated by a system of general education and, when strongly fixed would be the most powerful means of preventing their marrying.⁵⁸

This Whig belief in the power of institutional reform on societal change, and the Dissent influenced importance of education, culminated in a long term proposal where 'no child born from any marriage taking place after the expiration of a year from the date of the law...should ever be entitled to parish assistance'.⁵⁹ This gradual reform of the Poor Law required, for

⁵⁵ Otter *Memoir* xxxvi

⁵⁶ Patricia James, *Population Malthus: His Life and Times* (London, 1979) p93

⁵⁷ Thomas Malthus, 'The Scandinavian Journal, 1799,' in P. James (ed.), *The Travel Diaries of Thomas Robert Malthus* (Cambridge, 1966) p59, 89

⁵⁸ Malthus *Essay 1803* p279

⁵⁹ Malthus *Essay 1803* p261

Malthus, the inculcation of the aforementioned standards and morality necessary for moral restraint from marriage through education.

It is clear, therefore, that both Malthus and Godwin had a significant influence on the early evolution of ideas. Godwin, convinced by Malthus' logic, accepted the Principle of Population espoused in the first *Essay*, and moved to contribute to it as an overall thesis by arguing for the presence of moral restraint. This argument was clearly persuasive enough for Malthus to adopt it in the much changed second edition of his essay. Furthermore it has been shown to have transformed Malthus' social policy towards education and the Poor Laws. This mutually influential and respectful relationship between Godwin and Malthus, however, did not last, and the effect of its collapse on the overall debate is the subject of the next chapter.

III: Conflict, collapse and externalisation (1803-1818)

Godwin's diary illustrates that immediately after the publication of Malthus' second edition of the *Essay* the frequency of their meetings diminished significantly, with no encounters in 1804, two in 1805 and one in 1807, none of which were individual, one-to-one meetings.⁶⁰ Further to this, from 1807 – 1818 no mentions of Malthus can be seen; an eleven year hiatus between the two. For William Petersen this growing distance was a source of confusion:

Godwin's responses to Malthus's revisions of his theory are something of a puzzle...after Malthus had moved a good distance toward Godwin, not only accepting the criticisms of his principle of population but working for changes in society that would help obviate the preventive checks, Godwin replied with a long silence.⁶¹

The assimilation of ideas, inspired by Malthus and Godwin's proverbial 'move to the centre', indeed does not help to explain why there was such a change in their relationship. Mark Philp corroborates the dominant perspective in historiography in attributing the change to Godwin's declining reputation and Malthus' rise to the forefront of the intellectual landscape of the 19th century, such that 'Godwin sank into obscurity after the turn of the century and lived most of the last thirty-six years of his life in neglect and poverty'.⁶² The uncertainty of Petersen and the limited perspective of Philp can both be answered by evidence from the texts and the diary. Despite the acceptance of moral restraint, Malthus held firm to his Whig belief in institutions. The abandonment of deferential respect found in the first essay and the immiscibility of Malthus' commitment to institutions and Godwin's anarchism can go some way to explaining why their relationship changed. Furthermore evidence from the diary would suggest that Godwin maintained an indirect influence on the debate through his relationship with William Hazlitt who took up the Godwinian mantle against Malthus, which contrasts Philp's assessment that he 'sank into obscurity'.

Although Malthus accepted Godwin's argument for prudential moral restraint, the language used in the second edition of the *Essay* was severely critical and a sharp contrast to the polite

⁶⁰ *Diary of William Godwin*, entry for 'Thomas Malthus'

⁶¹ Petersen, 'Malthus-Godwin Debate' p20

⁶² Philp *Godwin's Political Justice* p7

respect in the first. The continued disagreement rested on his adherence to the Whig belief in societal institutions:

Of this check therefore itself, I entirely approve but do not think that Mr Godwin's system of political justice is by any means favourable to its prevalence...a system in which any way whatever tends to weaken the foundation of private property, and to lessen in any degree the full advantage and superiority which each individual may derive from his prudence, must remove the only counteracting weight to the passion of love that can be depended upon for any essential effect.⁶³

The invocation of the importance of 'private property' to maintaining 'prudence' indicates that Malthus had maintained his belief in the necessity of State institutions. Any change from private to common property ownership, to the institution of marriage or to formal education would serve to undermine the 'prudence' necessary to counteract the 'passion of love' and to encourage moral restraint. Indeed Malthus continued to criticise Godwin's advocacy of pure moral 'duty' rather than a Whig sense of 'interest':

If the whole effect were to depend merely on a sense of duty...I confess that I should absolutely despair. At the same time, I am strongly of opinion that a sense of duty superadded to a sense of interest, would by no means be without its effect.⁶⁴

This 'motive of interest' to which Malthus refers to on several occasions is premised on the concept of private property as a reward for self-betterment, a further example of his continuing Whig influence.

Godwin's discussion of methods of regulating birth rates through the number of children allowed per family and through infanticide prompted further, and far more vitriolic, response from Malthus:

It is still, however, true, as Mr Godwin observes, that the expedient (infanticide) is, in its own nature, adequate to the end for which it was cited...the permission of infanticide is bad enough...but I cannot conceive anything much more detestable, or shocking to the feelings than any direct regulation of this kind.⁶⁵

The clearly moral and judgemental tone of this piece serves as a stark contrast to the mild, polite and deferential tone of the first edition:

⁶³ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p72

⁶⁴ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p72

⁶⁵ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p71

In reading Mr Godwin's ingenious work on political justice, it is impossible not to be struck with the spirit and energy of his style...impressive earnestness of manner which gives an air of truth to the whole.⁶⁶

The difference in tone between the two excerpts is clearly indicative of a distinct change in relationship and attitude toward Godwin, and the adherence to the necessity of institutions illustrates a point of irresolvable conflict between them both. One of Godwin's fundamental principles in *Political Justice* was the evil of societal institutions in infringing upon private judgement and in perpetuating injustice and inequality, a belief that could not be accepted by Malthus. This conflict of opinion illustrates to some extent why Godwin and Malthus may have stopped meeting and directly debating for such a long period. This does not, however, mean that Godwin stopped having an interaction in the debate as argued by Philp.

William Hazlitt wrote of *Political Justice*: "No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry*" illustrating, in bold terms, his fervent admiration of Godwin.⁶⁷ Hazlitt himself contributed significantly to the debate through his vindictive review of Malthus' *Essay* in 1807. While commentators such as Robert Southey condemned Malthus' immoral interpretation of Christianity in a distinctly Tory influenced manner, Hazlitt pursued his criticism through restating Godwin's argument. Hazlitt, in a number of critical essays, viewed Malthus' philosophy 'that vice and misery are the only possible checks to population' as 'false...and peculiarly absurd', that 'food does not increase in an arithmetical series', instead arguing that Malthus' acceptance of moral 'restraint' as a 'preventative check' undermines any criticism of Godwin.⁶⁸ The clear similarities of these criticisms of Malthus to Godwin's arguments illustrates Godwin's importance in the continuing debate with Malthus. The similarities in their views can be further explained by Hazlitt's Dissenting education, a philosophy that has been shown to have had a foundational impact on *Political Justice*.

Godwin's Diary provides further evidence of his continuing indirect participation in the debate through Hazlitt. From 1803-1818 Hazlitt is acknowledged in the diary a staggering 313 times, ranging from meetings, dinners and lectures. Though we do not have direct notes on the

⁶⁶ Malthus, *Essay 1803* p56

⁶⁷ William Hazlitt in Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* p6

⁶⁸ William Hazlitt, *An Examination of Mr Malthus' Doctrines* in Andrew Pyle *Population: Contemporary Responses to Thomas Malthus* pp170-6

conversations between Hazlitt and Godwin, it can be safely assumed the topic of Hazlitt's response to Malthus would have been discussed. Through these discussions Godwin was indirectly contributing to the debate with Malthus, perhaps guiding Hazlitt in his criticism and writing. This is given further evidence given the number of specific mentions of Godwin reading Hazlitt's *Reply to Malthus in a Series of Letters* on numerous occasions. The most important of which occurred between the 1st and 12th of August 1807 immediately before a meeting between Hazlitt, Godwin and Malthus.⁶⁹ This meeting would be the last time Godwin and Malthus would meet for almost eleven years, and though one cannot assume that the meeting itself broke the relationship, it can certainly be seen to have contributed.

While criticisms of other writers had warranted direct responses in the appendices of the 1806 and 1817 edition, the response to Godwin was in the form of an indirect slight; the removal of the entire chapter 'Reply to Godwin' in 1817. The slight itself was made worse insofar as the chapter that replaced it, 'Systems of equality (continued)', represented Malthus articulating his Whig stance towards institutions in even more clear terms, further distancing himself from the earlier concessions made to Godwin.

A state, in which an inequality of conditions offers the natural rewards of good conduct, and inspires widely and generally the hopes of rising and the fears of falling in society, is unquestionably the best calculated to develop the energies and faculties of man, and the best suited to the exercise and improvement of human virtue.⁷⁰

This stance established, in no uncertain terms, that the radical anarchism propagated by Godwin was by no means the best way to improve man's virtue, and that the current form of Smithian, institutional capitalism was. This utter rejection of Godwin and his arguments provides a clear and sharp contrast to the approach of the first essay, and is indicative of the extent to which Malthus' thought and character had developed during the debate. The reason why Godwin was given such short treatment was that Malthus had, in effect, moved on from the debate with Godwin. The principle of population was being accepted as fact around Europe, and had a decisive influence on English social policy having inspired the censuses of the early 19th century and the following proposed reforms to the Poor Law. Malthus had succeeded in his mission to revolutionise the way the World viewed population growth and

⁶⁹ *Diary of William Godwin*, 1-12 August 1807

⁷⁰ Malthus *Essay 1817* pp74-80

welfare. Furthermore the debate itself moved away from the philosophical conflict of Malthus Vs Godwin (or the Utopians) and towards inspecting the empiricism of the principle and Malthus' calculations. This can be seen in the Appendix to the 1817 edition in which the questions of John Weyland regarding the specific doubling of population every twenty five years as an optimum rate were addressed, while the section relating to Godwin was simultaneously dropped.⁷¹ Similarly, far more of Malthus' time was devoted to his famous correspondence and debate with David Ricardo over the principles of political economy, discussing rent and Say's law rather than man's hypothetical interaction with his future.⁷² In a cynical interpretation perhaps it can be seen that Malthus no longer needed to afford Godwin due respect, having established his name in his own right. *Political Justice* was no longer in the public eye, and the intellectual conversation over Malthus' work had moved on.

⁷¹ Malthus *Essay 1817* pp366-386

⁷² Winch *Riches and Poverty* pp350-385

IV: Acrimony, Revival and Disregard (1818-1825)

This demotion of Godwin from the intellectual sphere and debate with Malthus was, however, not taken without response. In 1820 his final reply to Malthus, *Of Population*, was published after three years of devotional attention. The work was mentioned in the diary 628 times, which in comparison to the 647 mentions of *Political Justice* illustrates the significance of the work to Godwin.⁷³ This was not some brief essay responding to an insult, this was a carefully constructed, vindictive, 626 page refutation of the entire Malthusian faction and a retraction of all previous concessions. Indeed biographer Peter Marshall established that ‘Godwin’s own research and writing involved in him ‘a World of difficulties’ which required ‘patience indescribable’’, further illustrating the importance of the text to Godwin.⁷⁴ Clearly Godwin sought a revival of the debate with Malthus which had, decades prior, kept Godwin at the forefront of 18th century intellectual discourse. The content of the work sought to challenge Malthus’ entire philosophy by challenging the ‘most groundless paradoxes’ of the Principle of Population:

The theories of Mr. Malthus then being destroyed, the science of politics returns to its just and legitimate purpose...enquiring how mankind in society...may be made happy.⁷⁵

Godwin asserted that Malthus’ Principle rested on unreliable evidence from the United States of America: “It was America that by the inaccurate representations that were made of her population, gave occasion to Mr Malthus’ theory of the geometrical ratio.” Godwin next sought to supplant the evidence with his own from Sweden which illustrated that ‘four births per marriage must be the utmost in this country’, only ‘two’ of which would procreate thereby keeping population at the same level, rather than doubling every twenty-five years.⁷⁶ Furthermore Godwin argued that Malthus had fundamentally underestimated the ‘immense power possessed by this principle of ‘moral restraint’ as to discredit any claims of misery and vice being the dominant checks to population.⁷⁷

⁷³ *The Diary of Godwin*, entry for ‘Of Population’, 14 December 1817 – 25 October 1821

⁷⁴ Peter H Marshall, *William Godwin* (Yale, 1984) pp345

⁷⁵ William Godwin, *Of Population: An Enquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind Being an Answer to Mr Malthus’ Essay on that Subject*, 1820 ed. Augustus M Kelley (New York, 1964) p112, 481

⁷⁶ Godwin, *Of Population* pp441-2

⁷⁷ Godwin, *Of Population* p534

The culmination of these direct and uncompromising criticisms of Malthus was the judgement of him as an immoral agent of the upper classes who sought to disenfranchise the poor and perpetuate evil in the world:

The proper tendency of Mr Malthus's system is to persuade us to sit still, or rather deliver ourselves bound hand and foot into the hands of the awful and mysterious power that presides over 'those deeper seated causes of evil, in comparison with which human institutions are 'mere feathers that float on the surface'...No wonder that his book is always to be found in the country-seats of the court of aldermen, and in the palaces of the great.⁷⁸

The affronted and malicious tone of this excerpt is persuasive evidence that Godwin was using the polemical style to arouse controversy and tempt a reaction from the Malthusian faction. Furthermore it confirms that the argument over 'institutions' was a key factor in the exacerbation of their conflict. A blind comparison of *Thoughts Occasioned* and this would hardly persuade the reader that the author was the same man; the polite restraint of the former had been entirely superseded by the vitriol of the latter.

Godwin's intention to incite controversy becomes even clearer through his bold and uncompromising conclusion:

He [Malthus] has proclaimed, with a voice that has carried astonishment and terror into the hearts of thousands...the evils of which you complain, do not lie within your reach to remove: they come from the laws of nature, and the unalterable impulse of human kind.⁷⁹

The use of 'you' and 'your' is a clear attempt to invoke an emotional reaction from the reader, to provoke self-defence from Malthus and to attribute, not just empirical error, but immorality to Malthus. Godwin's juxtaposed this judgement of Malthus with a conceited vindication of his own philosophy: "There is no evil under which the human species can labour, that man is not competent to cure", which was not only a clear return to his former utopianism, but perhaps also an attempt to label himself the last advocator for the progress of man. The vilification of Malthus beside the benevolent portrayal of his own philosophy perhaps sought to inspire the same reaction as *Political Justice* did, namely the appreciation of Godwin as the culmination of Enlightenment optimism.

⁷⁸ Godwin, *Of Population* p538, p565

⁷⁹ Godwin, *Of Population* p621

Malthus' own response to the work is indicative of how transparent Godwin's intentions really were. His only direct acknowledgement of this extensive, but flawed, work was in the brief and dismissive '*Note, 1825*'. The note, with an air of condescending and aloof disregard, concluded that 'to return abusive declamation in kind would be as unedifying to the reader as it would be disagreeable to me' given the 'glaring' inconsistencies of the work and its 'character'. Despite this, and Malthus' charge that 'it does not require a reply', Malthus provided a brief explanation of its core errors:

To argue seriously with one who denies the most glaring and best attested facts respecting the progress of America, Ireland, England, and other states, and brings forward Sweden, one of the most barren and worst supplied countries of Europe, as a specimen of what would be the natural increase of population under the greatest abundance of food, would evidently be quite vain with regard to the writer himself, and must be totally uncalled for by any of his readers whose authority could avail in the establishment of truth.⁸⁰

Given the brevity of the response and the dispassionate style, Malthus' response can attribute to the same reasons as in 1817. He had conclusively moved on from the debate and no longer afforded the same time, attention or energy to refuting the conjectures of a man whose desire to incite controversy was so clear. Godwin had failed in his intent to revive the debate and to return to the forefront of the 18th century intellectual elite.

⁸⁰ Malthus, *Essay 1826* p387

Conclusion

This dissertation has fundamentally sought to reassess and re-establish the debate between Godwin and Malthus from 1798-1825 within a contextualist theoretical framework inspired by the Cambridge School of Intellectual History. What has become clear is that the overarching argument was over whether man has agency over his own future, or whether it is determined by a divine, providential, natural law of population. Within their mutually influential relationship, both agreed in man's limited but existent agency over the principle of population, through the exercise of virtuous moral restraint. Inasmuch as this assimilation of ideas can be attributed to their similar Dissenting education, the conflict that followed can be attributed to their irresolvable ideological differences. Godwin's hatred of institutions and belief in the unlimited power of reason clashed with Malthus' Whig belief in the supremacy of societal institutions and Newtonian loyalty to his accumulated empirical data. This discordant clash, in conjunction with their changing social circumstances, accelerated the demise of their relationship and brought about the externalisation of the debate to other commentators. The resulting change in attention of the debate from the anti-utopian question towards the implementation of the principle of population, its moral implications and Malthus' Political Economy made Godwin's role in the debate obsolete. His final attempt to recover the ground he had lost through the polemical *Of Population* failed and thus the debate ended in acrimonious contempt.

This form of narrative reconstruction is too often discounted by historians, especially cultural and intellectual who seek a more static, lateral approach. Using the narrative form allows adherence to the fundamental law that ideas can only be understood in their context, insofar as every examination of a concept is framed by its own contextual setting. To read ideas outside of their context would, as has been shown, undermine and obscure their meaning. The perceived historiographical fears of falling into teleology or linear history is negated by not anticipating the end to which the debate progressed, and by avoiding the problematic arena of historic inevitability. Through this approach, this dissertation has contributed a greater understanding of what Malthus and Godwin's intentions were, the meaning of their texts and why the debate progressed as it did, in relation to each other and their own lives.

Due to the scope of the dissertation, however, there are undoubtedly areas of context that have not been addressed. The importance of industrial development in England after the defeat of Napoleon on Malthus' appreciation of trade and commerce is an example. A larger project could, therefore, attempt to dissect the individual sections under greater detail and attention. This should be done, however, without losing sight of the overall debate for, as the adage states, 'to focus too intently on the tree is to lose sight of the forest'.

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